

Trade Union Resurgence in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Despite a global trend of declining trade unionism, the Ethiopian trade union movement is resurgent. Having fought off a harsh labour bill and forced industrial parks to open to trade union organising in the past few years, it has scored some of its most momentous achievements, acquiring in the process momentum and leverage. Membership has grown substantially in the last few years, and a sharp increase in workplace-level collective action has occurred over the same period. This article seeks to examine the factors that have enabled the rapid resurgence of trade unionism in Ethiopia, and thus the seeming paradox of a buoyant trade union movement emerging in a context where structural vulnerabilities prevail, at a historical time of global decline in the power and influence of labour organisations. It does so by comparing contemporary trade union strategies to historical iterations. It identifies willingness and capacity to engage in class contestation as the most important factors, and finds that they are premised upon and propelled by pressures and activity from below. The article finds the situation of Ethiopian trade unions to be at once pregnant with possibilities of further advances and serious risks of sharp reversals.

KEYWORDS

trade unions; labour movements; Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions

Introduction

In the contemporary literature, trade unions are generally assumed to be on a trajectory of global decline; waning membership numbers, bargaining power and political influence in many parts of the industrialised world certainly testify to that notion (Kelly, 2015). Such arguments have been applied to African contexts, where notions of growing global irrelevance have reinforced a scholarly turn away from what has become considered an unwarranted focus on unions and formal sector workers in Africanist labour studies and labour history. Instead, and arguably unfortunately, the contemporary scholarly trend is to increasingly ignore African unions altogether. Their past prominence in the literature is considered conjoined to somewhat of a caricature of the dominance of the male, industrial, formal sector wage workers, and is seen as a symbol of Eurocentrist projections of idealised conditions onto a continent where neither proletarianisation nor wage work nor trade unionism are now considered to have been significant enough to warrant the prior attention.

However, one should tread with caution when transferring assumptions from one context to another, and that goes for the discussion on union irrelevance, too. As Jon Kraus (2007: 283) has noted, for example, unions in African contexts frequently remain “the largest, and sometimes only,



significant organisational force that represents the interests of the popular classes”. Moreover, trade union movements in several African contexts are on a course which is profoundly different from that of unions in many industrial economies. In the former, wage labour is rapidly expanding, and thus also the pool of potential trade union recruits. One can argue that the discussion on trade union decline, when uncritically brought to bear on conditions pertaining to different African contexts, exhibits a tinge of Eurocentrism in itself. If it is correct that an outsize emphasis on the unionised wage labourer in the past emanated from a conception of an idealised state of strong trade unions and mass proletarianisation in industrialised “Northern” economies, then it is merely reflected in reverse in the contemporary neglect of trade unions and wage work in Africa, which is a result of the decline of unions and wage work in the economies of the Global North.

As McQuinn (2018: 111) argues, “research on the African labour movement which focuses solely on its deficiencies provide only a partial view”. In Ethiopia, the membership of the trade union movement has grown rapidly in the last decade, as has its impact, clout and prestige. Of course, the question of relevance cannot be resolved with reference to membership numbers alone. What trade unions do, to what end and how must be examined for this to be established; and their impact on class relations is an important outcome associated with this.

Trade Union Goals and Practice

Before one can begin to approach the issue of relevance, one must ask what the functions and goals of specific trade union movements are, and what practices are deployed to serve those functions. These are questions that we can broadly subsume under the theme of union strategies.

Taxonomies of unions based on what they aim to achieve and how they aim to achieve it are plentiful. Whereas the type of practices that limit unionism to seeking incremental economic goals through the collective bargaining process has been termed business unionism, the type which entails more explicit political aims has often been called political unionism, followed by revolutionary unionism when those political and economic goals require no less than the complete transformation of class relations and are underlined by incessant militant practice. At the other end of the continuum lies yellow unionism, which is a type of charade unionism that directly represents the interests of employers and/or the state. It entails unions directly or indirectly controlled by external interests, which implicitly or explicitly precludes class confrontational measures (Van der Linden, 2008). In between, Hyman (2001) has proposed the term political economism for the type of unionism which is incremental but entails both economic and political goals; Upchurch and Mathers (2011) ascribe the term radical political unionism for unionism which combines those goals with militant action. Moreover, in recent decades the term social movement unionism has become popular among activists and scholars who argue that the future of unions must be embedded in broader social coalitions, seeking to fulfil wider social goals than what is in the corporate interests of the membership (Seidman, 2011).

A novel attempt to look at unionism – from the angle of what workers and unions can hope to achieve and the conditions under which they can achieve it, rather than what their ultimate aims are and how it relates to their practice – is the power resources approach (PRA). The PRA distinguishes between structural, associational, institutional and societal/symbolic sources and resources of power that workers can use collectively (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018).

“The PRA”, McQuinn (2018: 112) writes, “stresses the significance of agency by focusing on the strategic choices trade unions make in particular contexts”. Furthermore, the PRA is useful in that it allows for broad comparisons between cases. However, the approach is not without

limitations. There are two main objections that are relevant here. First, strategic choices of unions are not neutral but reflect various social interests. One must thus consider not only the resources available to unions, but to what end and in whose interests they are deployed. Second, whereas the PRA tends to depict power as a tangible resource, it is more fruitful to think of it as a relational one, where class conflict is involved. Both of these points have been elucidated by Gallas (2016, 2018).

Rather than measuring power as an entity, Gallas (2018: 50) focuses on “the strategic options and choices of organised labour with reference to the relationship of forces between labour and capital”. This is because “class power is relational: it is the effect of a relation of forces between two sides” (Gallas, 2016: 202). Moreover, “it is strategic: it is exercised through the strategic choices made by actors operating on behalf of one or the other side”. Consequently, one must distinguish between union capacities and strategies. “[T]he activities of unions are only instances of the exercise of working class power if they defend, consolidate or improve the position of the working class” – that is, “if their activities can be seen as attempting to *actively shift class relations*” (Gallas, 2016: 201, emphasis added).

What determines whether union capacities are strategically deployed to actively shift class relations? Here – given the dual role of trade unionism¹ – it is important to note that unions are both subjects and objects, vehicles and terrains, of class conflict. Competing forces of labour *and* external agencies – employers, the state and political parties, to name a few – act within and upon them to influence and subvert union strategies. “Some of those strategies”, Gallas (2018: 51) notes, “may be more in line with unions as class organisations and some with unions as organisations of mass integration, and they can change over the life course of a single union”. In other words, the shifting sands of class conflict in which unions operate, and on which unions aim to make an impact, also permeate the unions and define to what degree they can function as class organisations.

Vulnerabilities and Strengths of Unions in Contemporary African Contexts

Whereas the somewhat sweeping characterisation of global trade union decline requires critical and detailed contextual examination, trade unions in Africa nevertheless face a number of common practical obstacles. McQuinn (2018: 113) has recently summarised five interrelated concerns in the literature thought to be afflicting African trade unions in the contemporary period – to different degrees, given the multiple contexts across the continent, and the fluidity of any one situation.

First, African unions suffer from frail organisational capabilities which result from factors such as weak abilities to influence terms and conditions of employment, declining membership, and difficulties in recruiting young and female workers. Second, McQuinn (2018: 113) notes that “organisational frailty among African trade unions is inextricably intertwined with the issue of funding” – given that African trade unions “often lack a solid financial base”. Third is the “shrinking number of formal sector workers”, and concomitant loss of relevance for movements

¹ Hyman (1975: 64–65) offers a compelling argument on the dual role of trade unions. On the one hand, a union serves “as the vehicle of workers’ interests against those of the employer”, and in this way “the union is involved in external relationships of control”. But such processes of control also “pervade the internal relationships of the unions”. Furthermore, “such relationships are essentially two-way; as unions seek to affect the decisions of employers and governments they are themselves subject to influence and pressure from a range of external agencies”. And since they are subject to internal processes of bureaucratisation, where the corporate interest of the labour officialdom may differ widely from the class interest of the rank and file, it is always possible that such internal control will serve adverse class ends.

rooted in the formal sector (McQuinn, 2018: 113). Fourth is the absence of a centralised and structured collective bargaining environment, and of collective bargaining capacities of unions. And finally, given most African governments' desire to attract foreign and domestic investment, labour legislation is often poorly enforced.

These perceived vulnerabilities notwithstanding, McQuinn also notes that African unions possess strengths and points of leverage. They include "the significant size of trade union membership across the continent", which, in combination with "examples of successful actions in defence of the rights of workers" demonstrates the degree to which African unions command associational power (McQuinn, 2018: 114–115). Moreover, rising inequalities and policies biased against working people across the continent, often deployed under the rhetorical charade of upholding "national interests", constitute potential points of leverage. They provide unions with the opportunity to rally members and social allies in confronting such policies, and thereby to acquire broader societal power.

But most importantly, increasing protests and labour unrest in the face of rising inequality provide unions with the opportunity of seizing the initiative in championing, coordinating and supporting actions by restive labour. The increasing number of strikes noted in the contemporary period, McQuinn (2018: 117) argues, ought to be "a wake-up call for the continent's trade unions", given the opportunities that reside in "playing a conspicuous role in such disputes, demonstrating leadership qualities, organisational ability and offer[ing] a clear vision". On the other hand, "if they fail in this", McQuinn cautions, "their relevance as representatives of the workforce in Africa is likely to be fundamentally questioned". This warning speaks to the non-negotiable bottom line of trade unionism which, as Van der Linden (2008: 179) argues, is that one can have strikes without unions, but one cannot have unions without the ultimate threat of strikes. And so, when a period of increasing unrest appears to be dawning in parts of the continent, the relevance of trade unions must at least partly be evaluated in the degree to which they can take the lead in such processes.

In what follows, we shall examine the Ethiopian example with these noted sources of vulnerabilities and suggested points of leverage in mind.

A Brief History of Ethiopian Trade Union Confederations

Ethiopia's first central trade union confederation, the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU), was formed in 1963. We shall refer to its first twelve years, ending in 1974, as the first CELU period, or CELU I.² The type of unionism practiced by CELU I was a cautious, incremental form of business unionism, predicated on issuing appeals rather than demands. This approach conformed to the state's intolerance towards militant unionism, and the legal prohibition on unions from engaging in political activities. However, a persistent radical undercurrent among the basic unions³ and the rank and file expressed itself in wildcat unrest and opposition to the moderate central leadership. The primary task on which CELU I focused was to strengthen the newfound organisation – through membership recruitment, replication of basic unions, acquiring sources of funding, and training cadre and representatives. The primacy of organisation-building efforts reinforced the reluctance of the leadership to risk further conflict. It was assisted in this effort and

² See Table 1 at the end of this section for an overview of the different phases of trade unionism in Ethiopia. The general features of the consecutive confederations that are described in this section are derived from and can be explored in more detail in Admasie (2018).

³ A basic union in the Ethiopian context is an enterprise-level trade union.

funded by institutions of the anti-communist strand of the international trade union movement, which insisted on keeping a close tab on the activities of CELU in return for their assistance. CELU was relatively successful in the effort, as the number of unions and membership steadily grew during the period, from some 15 000 members in 1963 to 73 000 in 1973 (Admasie, 2018). The organisation's cadre grew steadily, enterprises were established, and the confederation acquired a sizeable headquarters – built with assistance from the African American Labor Center. But it remained financially dependent on gestures of goodwill by its foreign funders. Moreover, the confederation's incremental and cautious strategy – underlined by wildcat action which was largely unintentional – generated a period of sustained, and significant, real wage growth. However, it came at a price, as the trade union movement became increasingly splintered between radical and moderate factions, and CELU I achieved no success in terms of either modifying biased labour legislation⁴ or changing the tendency of state institutions to ignore enforcing even the minimum conditions and rights established therein. In its unwillingness to address broader social and political concerns, CELU I also experienced relative isolation from broader civil and political society, and only towards the end of the period did tentative links to the Ethiopian Teachers' Association and students' movement begin to be formed.

In 1974, however, the simmering tension came to a head, and within the context of the February upsurge that was to mark the beginning of the Ethiopian revolution,⁵ radicals within CELU came to acquire the upper hand. This expressed itself, first, through a general strike that occurred in March of that year, and, over the next year and a half, a steady process of radicalisation which culminated in the confederation coming under the leadership of the Provisional Workers' Council (PWC) in 1975. We shall call this phase, lasting between early 1974 and September 1975, the second CELU/PWC period. Whereas CELU I had been unwilling to make political demands, in this phase the confederation demanded nothing less than the transfer of central political power to a popular coalition. All relations with the anti-communist international trade union movement were discontinued, as the confederation sought to stake out a line of self-reliance. This caused financial strains, but enabled the confederation to embark on an independent and radical line that resonated with workers. As a result, the confederation experienced a membership surge – growing from 90 000 to roughly 200 000 between 1974 and 1975 (Admasie, 2018: 89) – and in the short period it was operational a large number of new unions were established while old ones were reactivated. The central tasks were to rebuild structures, mitigate repression and organise workers for the inevitable confrontation with the new military-bureaucratic regime. In this confrontation, the confederation was part of a broader revolutionary coalition that included political organisations, the teachers' association and the students' movement. Desperate in the face of increasing repression, or dizzy with success, all-out confrontation was initiated prematurely. Two general strikes were attempted, and repressed. Eventually, in September 1975, the confederation was banned in its entirety. It had failed to achieve its goals of establishing an independent confederation and to force the military-bureaucratic regime from power, but it had created great upheavals on the industrial scene and in the workplace balance of power; it had forced a recognition of the potential of the movement.

⁴ Examples include laws that prohibited broad categories of workers from organising and that severely curtailed the right to strike, while failing to protect employment.

⁵ Despite its popular origins and an early phase of leftist and workers' mobilisation, the Ethiopian revolution of the mid-1970s resulted in the seizure of state power by bureaucratic categories. It led to replacement of the country's US-aligned imperial regime with a USSR-aligned military regime, and the destruction of both the civilian left and the workers' movement.

In 1977 the regime established a new surrogate confederation: the All-Ethiopia Trade Union (AETU). It changed its name to the Ethiopian Trade Union (ETU) in 1986, but it retained its central characteristics until the military-bureaucratic regime fell and the confederation was banned in 1991. We shall refer to this as the AETU/ETU period. This confederation was a yellow union to its core, and its central function – explicit as it was – was to assure social control over the workforce and to whip up productivity. Because of its place within the bureaucratic apparatus – AETU/ETU was not so much located within a coalition but fused to this bureaucratic apparatus in a subordinate position – the confederation also benefitted institutionally. It acquired significant property and real estate during this phase, including a new eleven-storey head office in the centre of the capital. AETU/ETU was a relatively wealthy confederation, and finances were improved by the institution of mandatory membership for workers – which, together with the permission of new groups of workers to organise, meant that the membership initially grew, before stagnating. The central staff numbers and bureaucratic capacity of the confederation increased significantly, and it kept a large local cadre of full-time officers in the workplaces. But this well-funded confederation ironically operated on behalf of a workforce that was becoming increasingly immiserated, and failed to protect the interests of the workers it represented in the most elementary ways. Real wages collapsed precipitously during this period, and by its end they averaged less than half of what they did in 1975. It also failed to ensure institutional survival, as it was dissolved by the successor government of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991.

By 1993 the EPRDF permitted the foundation of a new confederation, the Ethiopian Confederation of Trade Unions (CETU). Despite the government’s attempt to assert firm control over this confederation, it retained relative autonomy for its first couple of years. We shall refer to these years as the first CETU period, CETU I. The newfound confederation retained only the bare bones of staff and capacity; its structures had atrophied; and the membership had declined as many basic unions had disintegrated. In such a context, the confederation could do little more than attempt to rebuild structures. CETU did, however, retain legal ownership of the assets and real estate of the old confederation – a potentially significant source of revenue. CETU, which took a political economist approach, attempted to pressure the government into negotiating the latter’s structural adjustment programme – or the very least its implementation – with the confederation. This led to conflict, in which the government subverted, split and finally banned the operations of the confederation. Although the conflict was preceded by and coincided with a period of widespread workplace-level unrest and wildcat strikes, CETU I did not attempt to mobilise its membership to fend off the increasing repression by militant means. CETU’s first phase closed in 1995, with the confederation made inoperative; its leadership was either already in exile, about to be exiled or otherwise demobilised; a despondent rank and file was left with no protection against a top-down process exposing them to the vicissitudes of an increasingly harsh labour market.

The EPRDF, much like the previous regime, preferred to establish an entirely loyal confederation, and did so through a stage-managed process that culminated in 1997 with a new congress electing a deferential leadership. The phase that opened with this congress will be referred to as the second CETU period. CETU II was a yellow union, notable mostly for its lethargy, dormancy and dogged refusal to even feign to play its part in the charade. It refused to condemn the arrest or assassination of trade unionists, union-busting procedures at the workplace, or even to consider hypothetically that strike action could be warranted.⁶ CETU II was an isolated

⁶ Recall Van der Linden’s (2008: 179) comment that whereas “large and successful strikes are perfectly possible without unions ... unions cannot exist without (the ultimate threat of) the strike weapon”.

confederation. It found as little legitimacy abroad as it did in Ethiopian civil society or within the workforce, and was treated as a pariah by the international trade union movement. As a result of its internal weakness, the CETU II years were marked by demobilised inactivity and stagnant membership numbers. It is difficult to locate a single significant achievement during this period, but, given the lack of ambition to do anything but prop up the government, it is equally difficult to locate overt failures – despite the confederation having no discernible impact. But just as the CELU period generated an arch in which relatively autonomous trade unionism grew within co-opted structures, so did the CETU II period.

Table 1: Summary of Ethiopian country-wide confederations

	CELU 1960-1974	CELU II/PWC 1974-1975	AETU/ETU 1977-1991	CETU I 1993-1994	CETU II 1997-2010s	CETU III 2010s- present
Orientation	Business unionism	Revolutionary unionism	Yellow unionism	Political economism	Yellow unionism	Political economism
Membership growth	Moderate	High	Low	Low	Low	High
Industrial conflict	High	High	Low	High	Low	High
Social alliance	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Real wage change	Increase	Stagnant	Decrease	Stagnant	Stagnant	Stagnant
Impact on legislation	Attempted	Attempted	Not attempted	Attempted	Not attempted	Achieved

Source: author's compilation

Contemporary CETU

The contemporary period, which we shall refer to as the third CETU period, CETU III, began in the first half of the 2010s, as CETU, with a new batch of leaders and a progressive weakening of ruling party/government control over the confederation, embarked on a path of revitalisation and growth. This period has seen the gradual emergence of greater relative autonomy and growing assertiveness of the trade union movement – of the central confederation as much as basic unions and industrial federations. To understand this process, one must start by looking at the political economy in which this development has become possible.

Ethiopia has, for the past decade, experienced a renewed push for industrialisation. Coming within a longer trajectory of rapid overall growth, this has led to a steady but swift numerical growth of wage workers. In Ethiopia the notion of a shrinking formal sector, which the literature identified as a source of trade union weakness in African contexts, does not apply – quite the opposite: a growing number of formal sector workers has meant a deeper pool of recruitment from which unions can draw, and a greater role for wage labour in national economic plans has enhanced strategic leverage. Neither is this a stereotypically homogeneous male workforce. In 2016, 34 per cent of CETU's membership were women (CETU, 2016: 7), and primary emerging sectors in which

it has since organised – textile manufacturing and horticulture – are overwhelmingly dominated by female labour.⁷ But whereas employment has been expanding, real wages have been stagnant at best, and inequality has been growing (Admasie, 2018; Tassew and Mesele, 2019). The dreaded “national interest” that McQuinn referred to has indeed been re-invoked to justify such inequalities.

Moreover, expansive processes of proletarianisation coupled with increasingly exploitative practices by foreign and domestic capital⁸ have generated a serious increase in industrial unrest (Schaefer and Oya, 2019). Wildcat unrest constitutes a source of militancy egging on labour officialdom from below and a source of additional strategic leverage for the unions, which have come to appear as the only credible interlocutor between investors and workers. The opportunities identified by McQuinn are thus present, and there is every reason to believe that workers and unions have begun to use them. However, before we turn to the evidence of this, it ought to be noted that the political context wherein CETU III is operating has also been one of declining EPRDF rule, and, in 2019, its dissolution and replacement as ruling party by the significantly weaker Prosperity Party. This gave the confederation space: for once in its recent history it had time to rebuild unhindered by any acute political contradiction.

CETU is now operating approximately along the lines of Hyman’s (2001) political economism: the confederation is focused on expanding organisation and assuring incremental economic betterment for the membership, but it no longer shies away from making explicitly political demands when these are deemed to be within workers’ immediate area of interest. To be sure, these immediate interests are not defined expansively – the approach ought not to be confused with radical political unionism – but it is a significant step in a more assertive direction. One can exemplify this by reference to the contention over Ethiopia’s new labour legislation, passed in 2019.

In 2017, a draft labour bill was announced which would replace the one that had been in force since 2003. The draft bill was terribly disadvantageous to workers. It included provisions that would make it possible to terminate workers on the flimsiest of grounds, in addition to shortening annual leave and extending probationary periods. Moreover, despite the fact that there had been ongoing tripartite discussion between CETU, the employers’ federation and the government for several years, the announced draft had been written by an ad-hoc committee⁹ outside of the tripartite forum and announced without prior discussion with the tripartite constituents. Faced with such an affront, and with an outcry from basic unions who expressed determination to resist the legislation, CETU issued a public notice that it would call a general strike should the bill not be pulled (CETU, interview, 2019; EEF, interview, 2019). The intended effect was achieved, and the bill was renegotiated within the tripartite forum. The final legislation, which was passed in 2019, was far more acceptable to the confederation: it was devoid of the provisions most biased against labour, and included new stipulations which had been long-standing demands of CETU including the extension of maternity leave and the institution of a board to set minimum wages.¹⁰

The significance of this achievement ought not to be underestimated. Ethiopian trade union

⁷ This has not been translated into a comparable level of representation – CETU’s strategic plan includes measures to bring the share of women in the leadership of basic unions to 30 per cent (Dereje, 2019: 11).

⁸ Standard wages in textile production in Ethiopia’s new industrial parks are generally far lower than what is necessary for upkeep, and less than a third of the minimum wage in Bangladesh (Barrett and Baumann-Pauly, 2019: 9).

⁹ Reportedly, this committee comprised officials of the Ethiopian Investment Commission and the Ministry of Industry, two state bodies with a history of open bias against labour (Admasie, 2021).

¹⁰ Ethiopia does not have a minimum wage, nor has it had one in the past. The provision for the setting of a minimum wage is thus historic.

confederations – except in periods characterised by intense yellow unionism – have consistently demanded revisions to labour legislation and a say in its drafting since the early 1960s. Until 2019, there had been no impact in this regard. Moreover, no Ethiopian confederation has been successful in wielding the threat of a general strike to secure any concessions from a government since March 1974. In other words, the tussle over the labour law generated the greatest trade union impact on the legal field since 1963, and the biggest effect on industrial relations since the 1974 strike.

Growing assertiveness generated another significant achievement in 2021, as the largest industrial park, in which employers in collusion with state institutions had illegally banned unions, was forced to retreat from this stance and allow unions to be formed. This had been a contentious issue. CETU as well as the Industrial Federation of Textile, Leather and Garment Workers' Trade Unions (IFTLGWTU) had invested much prestige in the issue, vowing to organise the workers in the park at any cost – including the implicit or explicit threat of taking conflict measures over the matter. The fact that CETU and IFTLGWTU has begun organising basic unions in twenty-one of the companies in the park thus signifies an important achievement (Solomon, 2021), and CETU's resolve in doing so compares very favourably to comparable union-busting incidents under the previous iteration of the confederation.

Newfound Militancy and Vitality

It ought to be noted that the occurrence of decentralised workplace unrest – typically in the form of wildcat strikes – grew precipitously between the mid-2010s and the end of the decade. Such strikes, despite being legally unsanctioned, have frequently been successful in extracting concessions from employers, including wage gains. They have also forced formerly reluctant employers – who in the past in many cases preferred busting unions to negotiating with them – to tolerate, and sometimes support, the formation of basic unions. Government and employers require, and have requested, CETU's repeated intercession to solve companies' problems with recurring wildcat strikes (CETU, interview, 2019; EEF, interview, 2019). This has increased its clout further. But the direction of causality is clear: first wildcat activity, only then willingness to negotiate, and finally the plea that CETU get involved. The request for the involvement of CETU in such bargaining would not have been issued had not the strike weapon been wielded in the first place.¹¹

How local militant activity affects central outcomes can be illustrated with the two examples mentioned above in mind: the successful contestation over the labour law and the prying open of the largest industrial park for unionisation.

Several articles have described the diverse forms of unrest that have occurred in the parks over the past few years (for example: Barrett and Baumann-Pauly, 2019; Hardy and Hauge, 2019; Schaefer and Oya, 2019; Oya and Schaefer, 2021). They include both collective forms of action such as wildcat strikes and walkouts, and individual forms such as absenteeism and resignations. Wildcat strikes and walkouts may at first appear to be shapeless, but they are frequently coordinated by impromptu networks of workers that are sometimes in relationship with formal trade union structures. The different forms of unrest and resistance have presented serious problems to employers in the park, and have convinced government and employer representatives that

¹¹ Moreover, this is reminiscent of a significant reason why trade unions in Ethiopia were tolerated in the first place, and why they were encouraged by colonial authorities in other parts of Africa: in order to establish some degree of control over increasingly restive workforces.

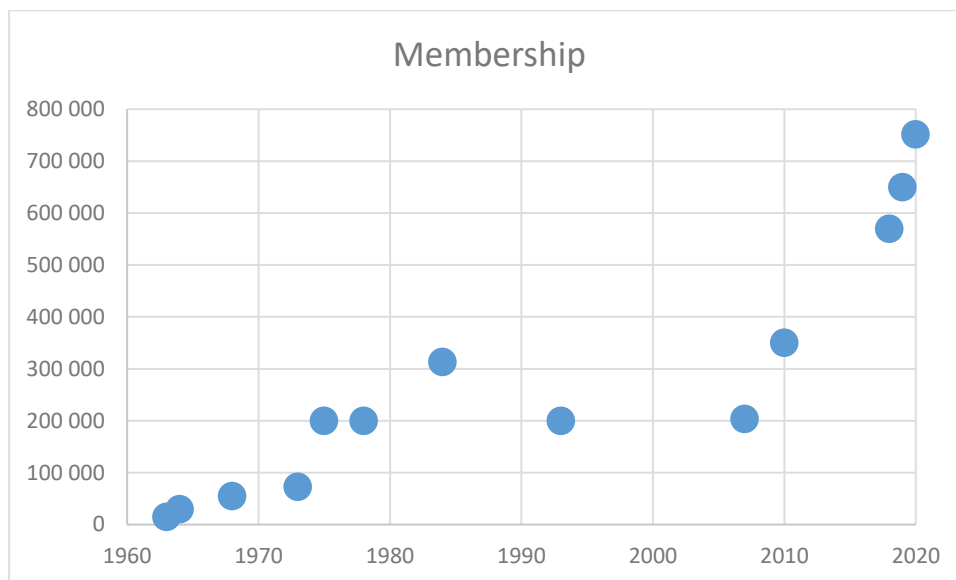
unionisation is preferable to the status quo – if only because it is assumed that unions can help mitigate such problems. Moreover, the workers’ networks and strings of wildcat strikes in the parks have provided the leverage on which CETU’s and IFITLGWTU’s resolve on the issue has been premised. Forcing a resolution to this question has been a massive task that has required sustained pressure, wildcat action and critical risks of confrontation.

But unrest is not limited to the industrial parks, although those parks have indeed “emerged as spaces of particular contestation” (Oya and Schaefer, 2021: 11). Although Oya and Schaefer (2021: 5) have found that strikes tend to be relatively more common in the parks than outside of them, the absolute majority of strikes reported in the past few years have overwhelmingly occurred outside of them. That is because only slightly above 1 per cent of Ethiopia’s waged workforce are occupied in the parks.¹² So while labour in the parks have received the larger share of recent scholarly attention – justifiably, because of the novelty of the parks and the high ambitions the state has placed on them – and whereas labour in the parks constitutes an important component of the trade union movement, the movement’s centre of gravity decisively resides outside of them.

When it came to overturning the 2017 labour bill, the flurry of wildcat strikes that occurred across the economy simultaneously provided CETU with not only resolve, but leverage. Had it not been because of the groundswell of militant action, CETU’s hard line on the labour law would have been less viable. Moreover, the impulse and willingness to resist the law that came from rank-and-file and local workers’ representatives was fundamentally important. Elsewhere, it has been recounted how CETU, in the lead-up to issuing the general strike threat, felt pressure from below to take action to prevent the bill from becoming law (Admasie, 2021). In a number of meetings where all industrial federations and basic unions were represented, CETU’s leadership was given an open mandate to call general strikes and demonstrations to resist the bill. CETU was also assured by the workers’ representatives that the basic unions were ready to offer whatever support was required in the campaign. The apparent readiness of rank-and-file workers and basic unions to confront employers and the state on the issue underlined CETU’s general strike threat, giving it credibility and viability.

All in all, growing central assertiveness and contagious local militant activity in workplaces has generated a forward momentum. Crucially, such momentum is coupled with a successful recruitment campaign in two interrelated ways: whereas this momentum has drawn new workers into the movement and rapidly expanded its ranks, the growth of the movement has in turn enabled its growing assertiveness. Between the years 2015 and 2019 the number of enterprise-level basic unions affiliated with CETU more than doubled, from 918 to 1901, and the number of workers who are members of these unions grew from 415 000 to around 650 000 (Biruk, 2019: 4; CETU, 2019: 14; Dereje, 2019: 11; CETU, interview, July 2019). Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth has continued unabated, and in 2021 CETU comprised 2 244 basic unions, and the total membership had by 2020 grown to 751 800 (Dereje, 2021; CETU, interview, October 2021). It constitutes the sharpest sustained growth phase in the confederation’s history (see Figure 1).

¹² Just prior to the pandemic, 82 000 workers were employed in the parks (Oya and Schaefer, 2021: 6), whereas a calculation of World Bank modelled ILOSTAT data generates a total waged workforce sum of 6 912 000 in the same year. This figure has been arrived at by taking the “Wage and salaried workers” (15.85 per cent of total employment), the “Employment to population ratio, 15+” (77.67 per cent), and the total of “Population ages 15–64” (56 147 000) for the year 2019 for Ethiopia from the database (<https://data.worldbank.org>).



Source: author's compilation from various sources in the reference list.

Figure 1: Membership in Ethiopian trade unions, 1963–2020

Vulnerabilities and Opportunities

The trade union movement's increasing assertiveness, clout and size has not come about without difficulties and obstacles; and there are vulnerabilities and risks that continue to impose limits on what is achievable in the short term, as well as barriers that must be overcome in the medium to longer term. One such vulnerability is the confederation's institutional isolation and the absence of any broader social/popular coalition. Another weakness – as one would have expected given the discussion above – is financial. CETU's structure – which is identical to that of past versions of the confederation – is made up of basic unions, which form industrial federations; at the apex is the central confederation. Financial weakness is most glaring at the lower levels, but even the industrial federations are starved of the financial and staff resources required to make for effective coordination and leadership.

Between 2017 and 2019 the total thirty-month income of CETU grew from 69 to 94 million Ethiopian Birr (ETB),¹³ which is slightly above the Ethiopian rate of inflation (CETU, 2017: 30, 2019: 36). Income from membership dues grew substantially – from 3.8 million to 6.4 million ETB – in the same period, overshooting the planned target by 13 per cent and indicating the degree to which organisation efforts have been successful. Despite this success, the share of income generated by such dues remains alarmingly low. This is a serious problem that is afflicting trade unions across the continent, and in the Ethiopian context it is aggravated by the appallingly low level of wages. The main source of income of the confederation – by some stretch – consists of rents generated from real estate, at 42.7 million ETB. A newly completed five-floor branch office building in the city of Jimma will boost such income further. The importance of real estate in financing the activities of the confederation can both be a source of strength and a vulnerability. Real estate provides a stable source of revenue, but there are attendant risks. Weak revenue from membership dues means that the confederation is dependent on sources of revenue that are inherently limited, while also prone to confiscation in the event of repression. At this stage –

¹³ The figure for 2019 would have translated into about US\$3.2 million during that year.

whatever its merits – financial reliance on rents is a fact which is unlikely to be overturned in the short to medium term. The core problem here is of course foundational: an organisation of impoverished workers is always likely to suffer from difficulties in generating revenue from membership dues.

Another obstacle is the active resistance of employers. Union-busting practices are widespread, and labour legislation protecting workers is frequently flouted by the state – particularly when foreign investors are involved. This is because the government, which is facing a severe foreign currency dearth and a widening balance of payment gap, is increasingly focused on luring foreign direct investment to the country come what may – and a low wage rate is its foremost leverage in this. The passive and latent resistance by the state that this indicates is another obstacle – and a potential risk that could easily escalate. These two factors coalesced in the extra-legal ban on unions in at least two industrial parks. While it was enforced by employers, it was facilitated by state agencies who refused to issue permits for organisers to visit the parks or to censure the illegal behaviour of employers. But these dynamics also provide unions with precisely the types of leverage that McQuinn suggested, as the example of the mobilisation to pry the industrial parks open for unionisation has shown. CETU's hitherto successful campaign to open the parks for unions has won it prestige and momentum, but it also has the potential of furthering its leverage by bringing tens of thousands of new workers into the ranks of the trade union movement.

Another point of leverage and contestation in the coming period is the upcoming struggle over a minimum wage level, which will commence once/if the minimum-wage-setting board provided for in the 2019 labour legislation is formed. With wages as low as they are in Ethiopia, this could rally broad categories around an obvious and wide-ranging social justice issue. Another issue around which CETU can rally support and solidarity is its demand that the Ethiopian government ratifies the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention and Migration for Employment Convention, and extends the rights they prescribe to these groups of workers.

The political context also generates opportunities and uncertainties. A few years ago, when it appeared possible that genuinely open elections would be held, CETU was discussing – and publicly considering – the formation of a labour party (Solomon, 2018). Not only was the idea discussed in the Confederation's Executive Committee and newspaper, but throughout the structure of the trade union movement. To some degree, it appears to have been championed by the lower levels. During a 2 November 2020 meeting, workers' delegates of the General Council of the Industrial Federation of Tourism, Hotels and General Service Workers pushed the federation leadership for the prompt formation of a labour party, making it the “main question” of deliberations (Dereje, 2020). Obviously, the road to the formation of such a party would be tortuous and risky – both because the internal process of transforming an abstract intention to a concrete programme would throw up a long line of contradictions requiring resolution, but also because this process would be an obvious target for subversion by external forces or, failing that, incapacitation/liquidation.¹⁴ In any case, the subsequent closure of political space has postponed such consideration. But to assess the formation of a labour party on the likelihood that it would result in a genuinely proletarian party – or, given the risk of repression that party formation would entail, a political party at all for that matter – is to miss the point: the public discussion and the pressure from below to form a labour party is significant for the degree to which it demonstrates the current self-confidence of the trade union movement.

Further points of leverage exist, as demonstrated above, and provide potential opportunities

¹⁴ The Labour Party in Nigeria, in whose formation the Nigerian Labour Congress played a prominent role, provides a deterring example of the pitfalls of such a process.

for additional advances. Significant opportunities to organise far more workers also prevail – the industrial federation in the textile sector estimate that its 55 000 members only constitute 15 per cent of the total sectoral workforce, and the growth trajectory of that sectoral workforce is sharp (IFTLGWTU, interview, July 2019). Moreover, CETU's declared intent to begin organising domestic workers has the potential to broaden and expand the movement significantly, as such workers total around 750 000 (CSA, 2021). But it ought to be noted that the confederation remains vulnerable, that these achievements are brittle and could quite easily be reversed if the external or internal balance of forces was to change.

The re-emergence of authoritarian rule in Ethiopia and the war on the regional state of Tigray that began in 2020 has presented a delicate set of new problems for the trade union movement. CETU has strenuously resisted intense pressure to voice any form of support for the fratricidal war. Instead, it has advocated a peaceful solution to the underlying political problems, offered practical solidarity with affected unions and workers in Tigray, and demanded that the government provide humanitarian assistance to the people of the region. That, in itself, is not a small feat of principled defiance. But it does not nearly eliminate the problems and risks that the war is posing to the movement. Leaving aside – albeit only because the unfathomable magnitude of suffering cannot be captured in this text – the devastation the war and blockade has brought to bear on people, workers and trade unions in the region of Tigray and bordering regions, the risk that trade unions and workers' representatives in other parts of the country face repression has increased substantially. In fact, incidents of such repression have already occurred. Moreover, the social and national divisions fomented by the war create ripples within the ranks of the trade union movement, too. The road ahead is treacherous, and contains risks of both internal division and external subversion or repression.

Yet, in many ways, such a backdrop is not as exceptional as it may seem, and it is one that the Ethiopian trade union movement is not entirely unaccustomed to. Recently, CETU has exhibited a strong interest in its own past. It has brought back the former president of CETU I – a fierce proponent of autonomous trade unionism who was forced out in the last bout of repression – to work for the confederation, and it has published a string of articles on its past, which includes its role in the revolutionary movement of the 1970s. Only recently, revisiting the repressed periods of autonomous and militant unionism in the country would have been considered excessively controversial. Resisting encroachment and pressure to fall in line with an increasingly exacting state, while learning from the past and walking a fine line so as not to be targeted by it, CETU has so far been able to manage the risks. In fact, despite the calamities of war and the COVID-19 pandemic, Ethiopian trade unions have continued to make advances in this context. In addition to the direct achievements mentioned above, the fact that the confederation has continued to grow rapidly between 2019 and 2021 – two years of political and pandemic crisis – testifies to the preservation of a forward momentum.

Despite concrete and serious vulnerabilities, then, Ethiopian trade unionism is certainly not experiencing a decline at present. Substantial advances have been recorded in recent years. CETU has grown rapidly and been strengthened as an organisation and movement, possessing greater autonomy, more leverage and assertiveness. The contestation and revocation of the 2017 labour bill and the illegal ban on unions operating in industrial parks are examples that demonstrate how the capacity and willingness of Ethiopian trade unions to engage in class confrontation has substantially increased over the past decade. That strategic turn has partly been made possible by decentralised rank-and-file militancy. At this point, however, it would be premature to conclude that the resurgence of Ethiopian trade unionism represents the return of a comprehensive and

viable proletarian project. Ethiopian workers remain far too divided along national lines, fractured by the sectoral and local difference in conditions, discouraged by prior decades of defeats, and battered by the conditions those defeats brought about for that to be a realistic proposition in the present. Although subjective class identity is a fickle thing that tends to emerge in dissimilar forms within each and every contestation, it would overstate things to speak of the becoming of a class for itself. Nevertheless, the revival of labour militancy and assertive trade unionism points to the ways in which – limited, perhaps, but nevertheless – class confrontation resonates with Ethiopian working people. It also points to the effectiveness of such measures in improving the conditions of working people.

Conclusion

In Table 1 key features of the different phases of Ethiopian trade unionism are summarised. Two periods stand out in red, characterised by yellow unionism. But outside of these, suggestive if not clear-cut patterns emerge. The prevalence of industrial conflict – generally wildcat action in the Ethiopian context – is an important factor here, providing militant pressure from below, which appears to enhance both union autonomy and leverage: relevance, in short. It also appears to mitigate vulnerabilities that have been discussed.

Periods of growing assertiveness and strike activity have generated growing membership levels, confirming recent evidence of such a causal relationship elsewhere (Hodder et al., 2017). It is notable that Ethiopian trade unions are currently experiencing a period that accounts for the greatest numerical surge in membership; this can only be only compared to the initial years of trade unionism in the country, or the years of intense class conflict around the time of the 1974 general strike. When measured against this actual experience of trade unionism in the country, rather than some abstract ideal, it is clear that contemporary Ethiopian trade unionism is more relevant than it has been for a long time. In the contemporary period, Ethiopian trade unions have scored two momentous victories – in fending off the 2017 labour bill and contesting the illegal ban on unions in industrial parks – by confronting employers and the state, and have experienced a historic rise in membership numbers. Those outcomes have been made possible precisely because CETU played that “conspicuous role” vis-à-vis growing unrest that McQuinn (2018: 117) identified of “demonstrating leadership qualities, organisational ability and offering a clear vision”. But vice-versa, it is the growing unrest – fuelled by decentralised militancy from below – that has made this strategic turn possible.

It may be argued that the strategic willingness to practise class contestation best explains shifting outcomes, even when in a cautious and limited manner, and that this willingness is determined by a number of factors, including that conflict itself, which permeate the unions. In the Ethiopian case, such willingness has been forthcoming intermittently. But whenever the unions have been engaging in class contestation, outcomes have tended to be relatively positive, and confrontational measures have generally resonated with the base. Recall, here, the distinction between union capacities and strategies. In the Ethiopian example, it is when the former have been deployed to actively shift class relations that the trade union movement has been revitalised.

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